

BOOK REVIEW

Brethren in Scotland, 1838-2000, Neil T.R. Dickson. Paternoster Press, 2002. 485pp. Index. ISBN 1-84227-113-X

Non-Presbyterian dissent in Scotland has had comparatively little in-depth attention from historians, which makes this comprehensive study of the Brethren in Scotland particularly welcome. The book draws on a wide range of sources including contemporary writings, correspondence, assembly records where available (the Brethren have had a relaxed attitude to record-keeping and counting heads), institutional and private archives and, not least valuable, oral history. The movement is seen not as a detached phenomenon but as emerging from early-nineteenth-century protestant evangelicalism, with which it continued to share characteristics, and, in the author's words, as "an innovative renewal movement embracing and promoting the new features of contemporary popular Evangelicalism". At the same time, their vision of the primitive church meant that the Brethren saw themselves in a long line of "recovery" movements stemming from and including the Reformation itself.

The aim of the book is to analyse the development of the movement incorporating its social history, using a chronological framework, and to assess to what extent that development was affected by the external pressures of social and cultural change, and the internal tensions generated by differing views as to the measure of emphasis to be given to essential beliefs and practices. Internal debate led to two major splits in the fellowship: the 1848 division into Exclusive (or Close) Brethren and Open Brethren (the larger group and the subject of this book), and the secession in the 1890s of the Churches of God (or Needed Truth, so-called after the title of their publication) over the question of standardisation and a more structured organisation. The essential characteristics throughout the movement's history are seen as the autonomy of individual assemblies (congregations), the practice of believers' baptism, the weekly Breaking of Bread meeting (the Lord's Supper) and an unordained ministry. There has been no central

controlling authority, but much co-operation among assemblies especially in the field of evangelistic outreach.

The author shows that in its early development the Scottish Brethren challenged traditions, empowered the laity and shared the contemporary evangelical vision of a transformed society. These optimistic beginnings, however, in a period of working-class self-determination and revivalism, meant that problems lay ahead for a non-centralised body. The 1860s, a period of rapid growth, saw the Brethren firmly established in Scotland with the formation of many assemblies in which the influence of revivalism was strong. Expansion continued until the early twentieth century, with many new members coming from the Missions and the Baptists. The informality of location and the freedom to participate in many assembly activities attracted young adults and avenues of outreach were developed, including the services of itinerant evangelists, Sunday Schools and other meetings for children, tract publication and distribution and overseas mission. Although opinion on the use of music in services remained divided the majority of assemblies adopted the organ, some formed choirs (both male-voice and mixed) for outreach work and hymn-singing in services and at home remained a strong Brethren tradition. At the same time bible study and doctrine remained prominent and characteristic, through weekly “bible reading” and regular Sunday “ministry meetings”, and conferences which drew wide attendances beyond the organising assembly. Brethren journals and magazines were founded, including *The Witness* (1870), *The Believer's Magazine* (1891) and *The Harvester* (1923). Books, especially commentaries, were widely purchased and the Brethren publishing houses Pickering and Inglis (Glasgow) and John Ritchie (Kilmarnock) became institutions.

Outward expansion, however, was accompanied by growing conservatism to the extent that the author describes the Scottish Brethren by the end of the nineteenth century as “an established sect”. Settled patterns of church life, a concern with orthodoxy and with separation led to the abandonment, generally speaking, of features of the early years, such as the “open platform” (no pre-arranged preachers at services), and to lasting division of opinion over such matters as “the reception question” (whether to receive non-Brethren Christians to the Lord’s Table) and relations with

other Evangelical bodies generally. Differences over the doctrine of sanctification and towards the “Holiness Movement” (from which the Brethren ultimately separated) and eschatology (the Brethren had generally accepted dispensational millennialism) did not lead to schism but remained. In spite of divisions, contained to some extent by the principle of assembly autonomy, growth continued into the twentieth century: in the mid-1930s there were said to be around 30,000 Brethren in Scotland, which had dropped to around 25,000 in 1960. It appears that the Brethren were in their most developed form in the inter-war years and that this had an after-life until the 1960s, membership being boosted in the 1950s from results of the Billy Graham All-Scotland Crusade of 1955 with which many Brethren were involved.

Open division amounting eventually to a polarisation between “conservationists” and “innovators” stemmed from a strong Scottish Brethren opposition to liberalising trends advocated by a group of English Brethren and voiced at a Conference (one of a series) held at High Leigh, Derbyshire, in 1955. Objection chiefly gathered around proposals for bible-school training for those who showed promise, the public participation of women in services and rapprochement towards Christians outside the Brethren. High Leigh reflected the current trend towards denominationalism then at work in England. In commenting on the Scottish opposition to these changes Neil Dickson points to the social differences reflected in the division of opinion: largely middle-class in England, working-class in Scotland.

The book pays considerable attention to the nature of Brethren spirituality, which is seen as characterised by “supernaturalism”, expecting the supernatural to be operative in daily life; “separation” from the secular world and at its most extreme from other Christian bodies; and “cerebralism”, an emphasis on right doctrine and its understanding (surely a legacy of the Reformers). The section on “the Morning Meeting” (the Lord’s Supper), “in which Brethren spirituality found its fullest expression”, is particularly welcome as a contribution to the comparative study of this important Christian service; in this case focussed on the person of Christ with a liberty of ministry from among the men in the fellowship, an emotional

and meditative occasion compared to the more cerebral sessions of bible study or hearty gospel meetings.

Also given its place is the social context of the Brethren Movement and the positive side to its internal social life. The Scottish Brethren had first been strongest among industrialised communities and occupational groups, similar to the social composition of nineteenth-century English nonconformity. Since World War II they have been predominantly lower middle-class and skilled working-class, with some upward social movement in more recent times and increasing representation in the professions, business and public life. While revivalist activity was preferred over social activity, the latter was internally supportive of the membership. Many of the activities, such as socials, soirees, tea-meetings and excursions, although generated by spiritual and evangelistic concerns, were similar in type to those of contemporary society, religious and secular. Until the 1950s at least most assemblies had several Sunday and week-night services, conferences and tent campaigns. The “Half-Yearly” ministry meetings were still well attended as were missionary meetings and rallies which could fill the late lamented St Andrew’s Halls in Glasgow. As is pointed out here, although involvement with contemporary culture and society was to be avoided as far as possible, contact had to be maintained in order to spread the gospel.

The disintegration, loss of vitality and downward trend in membership experienced by the Scottish Brethren in the later twentieth century has also been the experience of every other Christian community, and for much the same reasons. In the light of this study one cannot help wondering whether some recent “innovations”, aimed at stemming decline, are not as much a direct response to the pressures of, among others, materialism, individualism, the feminist movement and the culture of leisure as to any soul-searching — or bible searching — among the Brethren. Recent changes in Brethren church life and practice have so far not affected the principle of assembly autonomy. However, the appointment in some assemblies of full-time local workers, or “pastors”, while not amounting to an ordained ministry nevertheless is a departure from the Brethren’s historic commitment to the free exercise of gifts in the assembly. It is difficult to see such a radical departure as an “innovation” (as, for example, re-naming the Gospel Hall

an Evangelical Church or holding a morning “family service” instead of an evening evangelistic meeting), or how the Brethren could evolve to this extent without its demise as the fellowship portrayed in this book.

Margaret H.B. Sanderson
Linlithgow

